

# IDAHO FOREST LEGACY PROGRAM ANNOUNCED

After completing an “Assessment of Need” which included public comment, Idaho has been accepted by the USDA Forest Service as the newest Forest Legacy State in the nation. The Forest Legacy Program, created in the 1990 Farm Bill, was established to ascertain and protect environmentally important forest areas that are threatened by conversion to non-forest uses and to promote forestland protection and other conservation opportunities. The program provides federal funding to Idaho to purchase conservation easements on private lands that might otherwise be developed and lost as forests.

Forest Legacy is voluntary and will include only those private landowners who wish to sell development rights to their lands. For those landowners, participation in the program allows them to capture part of the value their land has for development but, at the same time, assure that it will remain as forestland forever. The program will be an important tool for protecting the economic and environmental values associated with private forest lands and upon which so many rural Idaho communities have relied. One of the objectives of the program is to preserve forests as “working forest landscapes” where future timber production and the wildlife, recreational, and scenic values from the traditional management of those lands can be continued.

Two aspects of private lands and private landowners highlight the importance of the Idaho Forest Legacy Program:

First, a steady rise in the percentage of timber cut each year that comes from private lands implies that reductions in the amount of available timber would contribute to the closure of more mills in Idaho. The Forest Legacy Program’s goal of reducing conversions of forest lands to non-forest uses will help maintain “working forest landscapes” that will support a viable forest industry in the State. Nonindustrial landowner harvesting provides timber in an amount that very nearly captures annual sawtimber growth of 447.6 million board feet. Private nonindustrial lands play a major role as a source of timber within the State and will likely continue to do so. It would be very rare indeed to find a parcel of nonindustrial land where some past cutting has not taken place, and substantial volumes are cut each year. Even if a particular landowner has no plans to harvest timber, forest health considerations or a change in ownership can easily cause a change in that objective.

Second, nonindustrial landowners, particularly, value all that their forests provide in addition to timber. In fact, it is the loss of the non-timber values that is most often cited as the reason for not harvesting timber. Given some reluctance to harvest timber in order to protect those scenic, recreational and wildlife values, it would seem that there would be an equal reluctance to see these values lost through development of the land. On the other hand, University of Idaho studies found that 28 percent of the landowners viewed their lands as an investment and 15 percent of all landowners (25% of smaller landowners) did indicate that they would likely sell at least part of their lands within five years. This would argue that nonindustrial landowners are motivated by money. To the extent this is true, increasing land values would be an enticement to monetize the value of nonindustrial forestlands. The Forest Legacy Program, however, would allow landowners to achieve a significant portion of that value while still meeting their clear goals of protecting all the other values.

Three basic demographic and economic trends in Idaho are combining to make rural forested lands more attractive for uses that would convert them from forests or change the uses for which they have traditionally been managed:

1. Growth in population, particularly in the urban areas of the State

2. A decline in the traditional agriculture and forest products sectors of the economy relative to the rest of the State's economy
3. An influx of part time residents or recreational visitors to rural areas of the State

Estimates state that over the next quarter century, Idaho will gain approximately another 450,000 people. Such a growth in population poses a challenge in terms of private forestlands that might be converted to other non-forest uses. Urban and suburban areas will inevitably grow, and to the extent that those areas are within forested landscapes, forestlands will yield to that growth and be developed. Two-thirds of the State's population now lives in Idaho's seven most urbanized counties.

The Forest Legacy Program focuses exclusively on private lands, specifically private lands that can be classed as forest and woodlands by virtue of having some tree cover. This land provides multiple values, either in terms of direct economic values associated with timber or livestock production or in the wildlife, recreational, aesthetic or other values that each owner perceives. Similarly, each landowner has in mind different goals for managing their land to produce or maintain those values.

The combination of increased demand on rural forested lands for residential and recreational home sites coupled with increased reliance on private timberlands to support the State's remaining forest industry underscores the importance of the Idaho Forest Legacy Program. One objective of the program is to limit conversions of these important forestlands to other uses and to help maintain the economic benefits that the forest industry continues to provide in some areas of the State.

The implications for Idaho's privately owned forestlands are obvious—it is becoming increasingly valuable and sought after for purposes other than growing trees or grazing cattle. It is being marketed either for its own intrinsic environmental values or for its proximity to public lands. Unfortunately, the increase in monetary value and the inevitable development of this land threatens all of that which makes it attractive, including sustained wildlife, scenic, and timber values. How Idaho reconciles the desire of private landowners to capture the value of their lands without destroying much of the underlying nature of that value will be a major issue as the State steps into the new century. The Idaho Forest Legacy Program will provide a useful tool for that effort.

Idaho's Forest Legacy Program will reflect the broad goals of the national program by recognizing that, in order to protect all the forest values and the benefits that society derives from forested lands, it is first necessary to maintain those lands as forests. Inherent in Congress's authorization of the Forest Legacy Program is the recognition that most forested lands in the United States are held by private landowners and that those landowners face growing financial pressure to convert those lands to uses that will forever remove them from the forested land base. Most of those pressures arise from the demand for these lands for residential and commercial developments.

Idaho's Forest Legacy Program is not designed to arrest this trend or to impinge upon the rights of private landowners to sell or manage their lands as they may desire. It will, however, provide a tool for willing landowners who need the revenue that development of their lands would provide, but who might also prefer that their land continue to provide the values for which it has been traditionally managed. By allowing a one-time purchase of the "development rights" by the State of Idaho, landowners can derive both immediate financial benefits and be confident, along with the public, that the lands thus enrolled in the program will remain as forests continuously. The Idaho Department of Lands will be responsible for assuring that the terms of the easement are met in perpetuity.

Within the broad context of maintaining forested landscapes, the Idaho Forest Stewardship Committee has identified specific goals for Idaho's program. These include:

- Reduce future conversions of forestland and forest resources,
- Maintain forest sustainability and the historic uses of forested lands,
- Assist in maintaining the culture and economies of rural communities through maintaining "working" forest landscapes,
- Protect and enhance water quality and water quantities,
- Maintain riparian areas, and,
- Protect wildlife habitat and maintain habitat connectivity within forested landscapes.

These are the long-range goals of Idaho's Forest Legacy Program. On a less extensive basis, however, it is also important to develop specific objectives for the short term to assure progress in meeting the long-term goals. Toward this end, the Idaho Forest Stewardship Committee has identified these program objectives:

- Focus efforts where areas of private forestland face near-term threats of conversion to non-forest uses and where the consequences of the associated losses to important ecological, social and economic benefit from those lands are significant.
- Encourage private landowners to work with communities, agencies, businesses and other organizations to strengthen their management of forest resources.
- Secure additional conservation investments in private forestland.

There are five basic steps to implementation of the Idaho Forest Legacy Program:

1. Publish information about the program as a prelude to solicitation of proposals,
2. Inform landowners, landowner groups, land trust organizations, forestry consultants, and others of deadlines for project proposals and the format for them,
3. Review and rank the proposals,
4. Submit those approved by the Idaho Forest Stewardship Committee, and,
5. Assist in closing those that are approved nationally and for which funding is available.